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The Contemplative Stream

Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

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This morning and throughout Advent and the Christmas season I begin a series of sermons called "Streams of Living Water." I am indebted to Richard Foster for his book of the same name. In these weeks, we will speak of a mighty river of the Spirit that is bursting forth from the hearts of women and men, boys and girls. It is a deep river of divine intimacy, a powerful river of holy living, a dancing river of jubilation in the Spirit, and a broad river of unconditional love for all peoples. As Jesus says in John 7, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

Renewal comes by the work of the Holy Spirit. Many of the streams or traditions within Christianity of which we will speak have been isolated from one another for a very long time. Over the centuries, some precious teaching or vital experience is neglected until, at the appropriate moment, a person or movement arises to correct the omission. Numbers of people come under the renewed teaching, but soon vested interests and a host of other factors come into play, producing resistance to the renewal, and the new movement is denounced. In time, it forms its own structures and community life, often in isolation from other Christian communities. But today our Lord has begun to bring these streams together into a Mississippi of the Spirit.

As we look at these various streams, I would always point you to Jesus. It was Jesus who gave us the way to conjugate all the verbs of our living. Too often in our concern to make doctrinal points we rush to expound upon Jesus' death, and in so doing we neglect Jesus' life. This is a great loss. Attention to Jesus in his living gives us important clues for our living.

Jesus lived in this broken, painful world, learning obedience through the things that he suffered, tempted in all the ways we are, and yet remaining without sin. We are, to be sure, reconciled to God by Jesus' death, but even more, we are 'saved' by his life - saved in the sense of entering into his eternal kind of life, not just in some distant heaven but *right now* in the midst of our broken and sorrowful world. When we carefully consider *how* Jesus lived while among us in the flesh, we learn *how* we are to live - truly *live* - empowered by him who is with us always even to the end of the age. We then begin an intentional *imitatio Christi*, imitation of Christ, not in some slavish or literal fashion but by catching the spirit and power in which he live, and by learning to walk in his steps.

We all hunger for a prayer-filled life, for a richer, fuller practice of the presence of God. It is the Contemplative Stream of Christian life and faith that can show us the way into just such an intimacy with God. This reality addresses the human longing for the practice of the presence of God.

Biblical examples of the Contemplative Tradition abound - from the Psalmist, who meditated upon God's character, Law, and creation, to Mary, the mother of Jesus, who pondered all things in her heart; from Elijah, who kept a lonely vigil over earthquake, wind and fire, to Mary of Bethany, who chose to sit at Jesus' feet.

This morning I want to focus upon Mary the mother of Jesus. To use the words of Teresa of Avila , the contemplative life is 'an intimate sharing between friends.' At the heart of this prayer-filled life is attentiveness to who God is and what God is doing. Of course, God is much more than our friend, but the reason why we can be attentive to God is because of the attention God has given to the humble individuals Mary alludes to in her song.

Mary's song exemplifies the contemplative tradition because it celebrates the activity of God in human life. While she is initially troubled by God's plan for her, she agrees to partner with God in the accomplishment of his will. And today we celebrate that very reality in our lives. The contemplative tradition emphasizes the fact that God is mindful of us and continues to invite us to play a role in the doing of his will in the world.

Poet Ann Weems has a piece about Mary. It goes like this:

Mary,
Nazareth girl,
What did you know of ethereal beings
with messages from God?
What did you know of men
when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies,
you, barely out of childhood yourself?
God-chosen girl:
What did you know of God
that brought you to this stable
blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready
waiting
listening
for the footsteps
of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us
if we have the faith to listen?
(from *Kneeling in Bethlehem by Ann Weems © 1985)*

The Contemplative Stream is the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us. It is about becoming 'beautiful of soul.' It is the process of developing a delicate but deepening <u>love</u> for God that feels more like a gift than an achievement. John of the Cross calls it a 'secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God.' It is about <u>peace</u> - a peace that passes understanding, a quiet rest, a firmness of life orientation, and about a Presence. This stream is also about <u>delight</u> - one woman captured the essence of this quality when she declared, "Fun ahead, saith the Lord!" There is pleasure, friendship, joy - deep joy. And playfulness. God laughs into our soul and our soul laughs back into God. It is also about <u>emptiness</u>, because at the very moment we are entering a loving delight we are also pulled into intense longing, yearning, searching - searching and not finding. Well, there is a finding of sorts, but not a complete finding. Perhaps you might call it a dissatisfied satisfaction. John of the Cross calls it "a

living thirst … (the) urgent longing of love." Often this emptiness is a darkness as well. We experience the God who is hidden from us, a dryness, a Sahara of the heart. In these experiences, God is our welcome companion, for we are learning to be alone with Him.

The Contemplative Stream is also <u>fire</u> - not a literal fire, of course, but real fire nonetheless, in some ways more real than literal fire. The initial movement of love now intensifies, become a steady, burning passion. Anything that causes distance or separation from God - disobedience or perhaps mere neglect - is painful in the extreme. So we feel, and even welcome, the purifying fire of God's love burning out the dross - all our stubbornness, all hate, all bitterness, all rigidity, all grasping need for self-promotion. And as the self-sins are burned away, the seeds of universal love blossom and flower.

The Contemplative Stream is also <u>wisdom</u> - not sterile intellectualism or impersonal awareness, but a knowing and inflowing of God himself. We join with the prophet Habakkuk and are 'filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' We know as we are known. We enter that eternal life which, as Gospel writer John says, is to 'know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'

And through it all, this Contemplative Stream brings with it <u>transformation</u> - God gradually and slowly 'captures' the inner faculties - first the heart and the will, then the mind, the imagination, and the passions. The result is the transformation of the entire personality into the likeness of Christ. More and more and more we take on his habits, feelings, hopes, faith and love.

The first and most fundamental contribution of the Contemplative Stream is that it constantly fans the flames of our 'first love' - Jesus. This Stream always calls us back to our beginnings, always forces us to the root, always reminds us of our foundation. It keeps saying to us, 'Fall in love with Jesus over and over and over again.' But don't let the simplicity of the message fool you - maintaining our 'first love' requires ceaseless vigilance. We need habitual reminders that the Christian life comes not by gritting our teeth but by falling in love.

Second, the Contemplative Stream forces us beyond a cerebral religion. It insists on the insufficiency of intellectual formulation alone. This is important to hear because of our perennial tendency to keep faith at arm's length - even from ourselves. If all this gets to close to us, we say, we might lose out objectivity, our perspective. And our independence. Oh, how we fear the loss of our independence!

Third, the Contemplative Stream is places stress upon the centrality of prayer. Contemplatives don't think of prayer as a good thing, or an important thing, but as the *essential* thing, the *primary* thing. And there is distinctive angle - a stress upon silence and a call to unceasing prayer.

Fourth, more than the other approaches to faith, the Contemplative Stream emphasizes the solitariness of our life with God. In the language of the old folk spiritual, we must travel this 'lonesome valley' alone. Solitariness doesn't mean individualism, but it does mean that there are limits to the role of community. I am responsible for developing a personal history with God. You too. That is not something others can do for us. So, while we always want to affirm the importance of the Christian community, we need to understand that our growth in grace must contain a good dose of solitude.

This is a rocky, desert spirituality. We are summoned to explore the desolate, barren landscape of the soul - landscape that most people studiously avoid. Yet, it is the place where we find true hope, but only after we see how like despair hope is. This

place where I urge you to go is where we discover that the cross means mercy and not cruelty, life and not death. Every one of us is called to be a contemplative, in the sense of a holy habit of contemplative love that leads us forth in partnership with God into creative and redeeming work.

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